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## What I Did this Summer or The Top Ten Things I Learned at the MWP Summer Institute

*Julia Blenkush*

**10. You can teach an old dog new tricks.** Wikis? Blogs? Podcasts? Bring 'em on! Rather than replacing our tried and true writing assignments, these tools enrich language assignments and provide countless possibilities for collaborative and creative endeavors.

**9. Two heads are better than one.**

Within our inquiry groups, we explored a topic of interest together. This was group work at its finest. Few of us left with the original question intact; together we had stretched, whittled, and formulated new ways of looking at our initial topic and developed a plan to pursue our own research.

**8. Writing every day keeps the doctor away.** My journal is filled with first drafts of memoirs, poems, stories, and letters that were planted during our daily writing prompts. Like exercise and a balanced diet, writing every day became part of a healthy routine to get my mind moving and creating.

**7. It takes a writing group to nurture a writer.** Writing can be risky. Like a mother hanging onto the hand of her kindergartener at the bus stop on the first day of class, we're reluctant to let go of our creations, our fledgling drafts. What if they are misunderstood? What if no else finds them interesting? Sometimes it takes the firm but gentle voice of another to tell us to let go of the hand, hop on the bus, and get going!



*2009 Summer Institute Cohort*

**6. It takes one to know one.** I learned from the best teachers each and every day. Not only do they know exactly what it is like in the classroom, they also know how to take a single idea and stretch it a hundred different ways. I was a sponge saturated with new ideas.

**5. Writing is power.** From the pages of my colleagues I heard stories of personal strength, powerful love, great loss, and belly-laughing humor. With every word penned, typed, read and shared, we became stronger through our ability to articulate what was in our hearts and souls.

**4. There is strength in numbers.** Organizations such as the National Writing Project work toward strengthening writing programs and supporting teachers of writing in ways that truly promote learning and not just a series of test scores.

**3. All the world is a classroom.** Universities are great environments to dwell in, even for just three weeks. Museums, libraries, music, even a farmer's market were within walking distance, reminding me that learning doesn't take place only in a classroom.

**2. Live and learn.** I was given the opportunity to be a student again, which meant I could explore, practice, play, and interact with my peers in order to learn. I remembered how important it is to say something just right. I remembered what it was like to get so caught up in an idea that I thought about it long after the class time was over and picked it up the next day in class again.



*2009 Summer Institute participants*

**1. Most importantly, I learned all over again why I chose to be a teacher,** why I love being in classrooms, and why after twenty-seven years, I still look forward to that first day of class and the possibilities that await. I delighted in the talent of my younger colleagues and the wisdom of those who may have retired from the classroom but haven't forgotten that teaching is a gift. I celebrated myself as a teacher, a student, a writer.

## A Gallery of Writers

*Stephanie Rollag*



A compilation of sticky notes, sheet music, journals, and letters filled the space under the words: Our Writing Gallery. Comprised of words that we wrote and words of inspiration from other writers, our writing gallery represented each teacher who was part of the 2009 Minnesota Writing Project Summer Institute, individually, and collectively. It hung on one wall of the classroom where we began each day, a comforting fixture in our writing community. It was beautiful.

This creation was a springboard for our learning at the Minnesota Writing Project Summer Institute. We each brought a piece of writing from our own lives, and we assembled these writing artifacts to create our writing gallery. As the class continued, we became a growing, interactive gallery.

We exposed each other to the art of teaching writing. While sharing teaching ideas in front of other teachers intimidated me, I soon learned this was a unique community of teachers. I felt respected and valued as a teacher. With each demonstration, it became clear that we were exploring a topic together. We listened intently and questioned deeply. I found myself part of extended conversations that ran into "break" time or past the end of the day.

The MWP environment allowed each of us to be writers and our gallery began to fill with words. Each time that we wrote, I thought of my students' experiences. I had moments when I didn't know how to start and moments when I could hardly pull myself away from a topic. Sometimes I felt vulnerable sharing what I wrote with my writing group. Yet, I eagerly turned to them for help with specific problems in my writing. I can bring these real writing stories back to my students with a better understanding of their own writing struggles. I can also share with them the satisfaction of a completed work, the laughter that writers share, and the support that we can give each other.

As I head back to my own classroom, I recognize that I will have moments of feeling overwhelmed and frustrated. I take comfort in knowing that I can carry with me the inspiration of the Summer Institute and our writing gallery. I know that I am supported by a community of teachers and I can bravely implement new ideas and my own writing experiences. I can help my students be part of their own, beautiful, writing gallery.

## Spotlight on Urban Teaching

This past April, Jodi Anderson (SI 2008) attended the NWP Special Network conference on Urban Education in Louisville, Kentucky. This piece originally appeared in the Spring 2009 issue of MCTE News: The Newsletter of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English, another teacher network in which Jodi participates. To read Bonnie Benard's keynote speech mentioned by Jodi below, visit [www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2808](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2808).

### Remember: Resiliency Is in Community

Jodi Anderson

At the end of April, as I flew into Louisville, Kentucky for the National Writing Project's Urban Sites Network Conference, I could not help but admire the landscape as the plane descended out of pillow-thick clouds. Blue-tinged rolling hills, verdant treetops, and splashes of lilac-purples and cherry-blossom-pinks decorated the land with the gentility I associate with the South. Yet, what also struck me as the plane banked left over the silver Ohio River, was how close Louisville is situated to that water boundary with so much historical meaning churning its muddy bottom. Perhaps my love of symbolism is to blame, but ever since seventh grade social studies



Jodi Anderson

when I learned that the Ohio River divided slave states from free states, that boundary has stuck with me—along with the dangerous black-and-white generalities that accompany labels and assumptive divisions.

I mention these feelings of being in a “different” place because they are antithetically related to Bonnie Benard's keynote topic on nurturing a spirit of resiliency in schools. Labels (even the ones we subconsciously fight against) carry the incredible weight of connotations that can change policies, perspectives, and pedagogies. An author and researcher whose work has affected national policy in the form of Safe and Drug Free Schools and NCLB, Benard noted her concern with how educational policy is going backwards from the 1980s, as politics, more than social sciences, influences change. Prevention programs, Benard argued, are spawned from a Risk Paradigm defined by “deficits” and “problem youth”; “bureaucracies” seek to maintain “control” through “Eurocentric, mechanistic programs where the locus of control is external, and not with teachers or students.”

Benard's very definition of resiliency education, though, is shaped by long-term, developmental studies of how students have transformed risk and adversity into healthy development and success. Five determinants underpin transforma-

### Resources on Resiliency Research

Below is a list of resiliency related resources compiled by Jodi Anderson. For more information about these resources, contact Jodi directly at [jodi.anderson@anoka.k12.mn.us](mailto:jodi.anderson@anoka.k12.mn.us).

Since educational achievement gaps persist among racial, ethnic, and economic groups, the importance of promoting resiliency—the power for students to develop into healthy, capable adults—is crucial. While the National Writing Project provides an extensive list of resiliency resources, here is a quick sample of suggestions from “Resiliency: An Annotated Bibliography,” compiled by the Louisville Writing Project ([www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2783](http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2783)).

Adler, N., and McKelvey, S. (2007). *Instructional Strategies to Increase Motivation, Close the Achievement Gap, and Help Students Reach Their Potential*. Virginia Commonwealth University: Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC).

*This research analyzes the effect of instructional strategies and motivation on the achievement gap affecting middle and high school students. Society, schools and community, family, and the classroom are four areas of influence examined in this study.*

Benard, B. (2004). *Resiliency: What We have Learned*. San Francisco: WestEd.

*Bonnie Benard reviews 20 years' worth of resiliency and youth development research.*

Hoffman, M. (1996). *Chasing Hellhound: A Teacher Learns from His Students*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.

*Ten success stories of inner-city students revolve around the resilient impetus of a creative classroom and its contribution to the perseverance needed to overcome extreme personal challenges.*

Thomsen, K. (2002). *Building Resilient Students: Integrating Resiliency Into What You Already Know and Do*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

*Resiliency theories are applied to multiple intelligences theory, service learning, character education, and violence prevention.*

tive power, and teachers are agents of change in all of them:

1. While about 70 percent of people do “make it” in life despite exposure to risk and adversity, the change often comes between ages 18 to 30, as they process earlier lessons and experiences. In one example Benard gave, 176 out of 180 boys from a particular school were deemed “successful adults,” despite varying backgrounds. The link behind all these stories? A teacher, who, when interviewed about her “secret for success,” simply said, “I loved those boys.”

2. Behavior does not predict one’s capacity to change; resiliency is born from hope. Acknowledging the developmental role of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, people’s circumstances and threats to safety can impact development, which is all the more reason for teachers to meet students’ needs. Not only does this come from teaching “life skills,” but also from providing supportive care and questions that prod students to search for personal meaning and purpose. The role of writing and reflective reading in this process is critical for promoting social competence, problem solving, emotional skills, and moral/spiritual reserves. Recognition of the whole child is partly what Benard identified as a needed adjustment to any reauthorized No Child Left Behind act.

3. Another way to create transformation is through empowerment opportunities that proclaim “People matter!”

4. Empowerment comes from how teachers do what they do. Protective factors—instead of risk factors—include building caring relationships, creating high expectations rooted in respect, and giving opportunities that support voice, choice, and meaningful participation.

*Bernard’s very definition of resiliency education is shaped by long-term, developmental studies of how students have transformed risk and adversity into healthy development and success. Five determinants underpin transformative power, and teachers are agents of change in all of them.*

5. The power of listening to and sharing stories cannot be ignored. Resiliency stems from knowing how attitudes and words can change, helping people reinvision potential in students and old labels. In a new paradigm, “deficit” is reinterpreted as “strength”; “Eurocentric” becomes “multicultural”; “control” grows into “connectedness”; and an individual does not act alone. As Benard ended with a quote by Margaret Wheatley, “There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

“Community” is becoming a more socially accepted word, but it may still conjure up in some circles the “dangerous” connotations of weak dependence, anti-American socialism, or counter-cultural protest. Vygotsky inserted the power of the social environment into the educational vernacular, and terms like “socially situated learning practices” (such as blogging) recognize how learning grows from social contexts. But legitimizing “untestable” affective, social goals in education needs more public discussion to reinspire communities about where their hopes lie. Intangible, relational resources matter, and the people who offer and receive them matter.

On issues of community, I often turn to Martin Luther King’s concept of a “beloved community,” whose ideals would be broader than protests and reactions; they would be a way of living, where social justice would be as necessary an action as breathing. Though in conversation with the systemic power structures that influence policy, the community would function foremost from within its own heart, its own collective dedication to honor the integrative power in its people.

There are countless factors that propel resiliency from merely a philosophical issue into a pragmatic call to action. Still, whatever the adversity—whatever symbolic river has yet to be crossed—the classroom, the school, and the wider community that dedicate themselves to the work that fosters transformative power are a stalwart bridge over our troubled waters.



*Louisville, Kentucky*

*Courtesy of Greater Louisville Convention & Visitors Bureau*

## Improving Student Writing: Best Practices for Teaching Writing

**When:** Wednesday, October 7, 2009, 8:30 a.m.-  
3:30 p.m (CEU's available)

**Where:** U of M Continuing Education and  
Conference Center, St. Paul Campus

**Cost:** \$50 — includes parking, meals/snacks  
(continental breakfast at 8:30 a.m.)

### AGENDA

Welcome/Writing Prompt

**Keynote: Then and Now**

Presenter: Mary-Ann Smith, NWP Senior Scholar,  
NWP Director of Government Relations and Public Affairs

### LUNCH

MWP Video/ Continuity Survey

Panel: MWP TCs — Beyond the Summer Institute

Table discussion/sharing ideas

Final reflections

\*\*\*\*\*  
To register: By **Friday, Sept. 18, 2009**, send payment to MWP, 10 Nicholson Hall,  
216 Pillsbury Drive SE, Minneapolis, MN 55455, or contact MWP @ umn.edu to  
reserve a place and bring payment on the day.

## Sharing Their Words

**Rita Anne**

*Mary Kirchhof*

She sits on a couch  
an old lady  
With other old women and men  
in a facsimile of a living room

Eyes opening and closing  
Little focus beyond her  
hands that intertwine  
In a death grip

The nurse moves slowly, quietly  
passing out meds  
To the alive but not living  
Always together but alone  
The "I am. You are." gone

Yet as I touch her  
a flicker  
A child's open eyed enveloping smile  
deep joy!  
Not yet robbed of knowing  
Love.



*At writing retreat  
Writing groups meet.*

## She Plays by Herself

*Kelly Langdon*

She sits next to you  
plays with her blocks  
while, again, you play with your cell.  
I yell "Can you put that away!"  
You say "it's just being there that matters."  
But, just being there isn't enough.

## Armistice

*Debi Krengel*

Summertime is a season of bare arms. The magazines that arrive in my mailbox in June guarantee that I can tighten and shape my arms in just twenty minutes a day. Women in halter dresses and tank tops stare out from those magazines, their toned arms suggesting confidence, comfort, and freedom. My own arms have never been svelte and defined, regardless of how thin or strong I am. Instead they are solid, formless. For too many summers, I lamented that shapelessness. I sweltered through hot days in short sleeved shirts, uncomfortable about baring the whole length of my arms in a sleeveless shirt. I kept that troublesome elbow-to-shoulder region covered up. But a couple summers ago I had a realization: I have my grandmother's arms.

Her arms were strong and tan, both characteristics cultivated through hours outside in the gardens, lugging pails of vegetables up and down the big hill on the farm. By the middle of July Grandma's arms were leathery brown from the sun. I can still see the contrast of her dark skin against her faded flower-printed housedresses. Grandma's arms could roll out cookie dough with force, her forearms flexing with the effort of moving the rolling pin across cold, stiff dough. She lifted wet laundry from the basket up to the clothesline, again and again reaching for the line with a clothespin and a corner of quilt or blanket. Her arms pulled pans full of goulash and chicken out of the oven. She pressed her steaming iron over sheets, dresses, my grandpa's button down work shirts. Grandma had functional, everyday strength. Her arms weren't sculpted and toned. They were thick and wrinkled. Her underarms sagged. But she never asked for help to lift or reach or pull.

My own arms turn the same shade of brown in the summer sun, reminding me of her. I don't carry bins of vegetables or hang laundry, but I do carry boats down to the river and pull oars through the water. In rowing I discovered that I too have strength. My arms lift boats overhead. I reach for the water, stroke after stroke, trying to drop my blade in with both power and grace. And yet, even after months of rowing the shape of my arms remains the same. I am stronger, I know it, even if my muscles refuse to reshape themselves to my more perfect vision of them. Like my grandmother, I have my own functional strength. My arms are her arms, and I no longer cover them up. I set them free: to reach and flex unencumbered by extra fabric, to bask in the warmth of an August afternoon.

# National Day on Writing—October 20th, 2009

As you may have already heard, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) is sponsoring the first National Day on Writing on October 20, 2009. This day is intended to be an eclectic and energetic celebration of writing in its diverse modes and manifestations. To celebrate the power and importance of writing in our lives and work, we've put together a list of possible writing activities to do with your students, your colleagues, or by yourself.

Shoot and Write Marathons—Post photos on Flickr related to your writing marathon. For more information see <http://www.flickr.com/groups/1153923@N20/>

Set up a thematic writing event that focuses on a specific issue (letters to the military, writing about trauma or loss) or genre of writing (Facebook status updates, chalk art, writing on post-its, graffiti art)

Invite local authors to visit your class and discuss their writing process

Design a writing marathon in your school or classroom

Turn the National Day on Writing into a National Month on Writing. Look into how Australia and New Zealand turn the month of November into a novel-writing event every year: [www.nanowrimo.org/](http://www.nanowrimo.org/)

For more information on the National Day on Writing and how you can celebrate the event in your classroom, check out the following online resources:

- Official Website: [www.ncte.org/action/dayonwriting](http://www.ncte.org/action/dayonwriting)
- National Day on Writing Ning Group: [ncte2008.ning.com/group/nationaldayonwriting](http://ncte2008.ning.com/group/nationaldayonwriting)
- National Gallery of Writing online: [galleryofwriting.org/](http://galleryofwriting.org/)



Our very own "Gallery of Writing"—a collection of writing artifacts to push our understanding of writing. Curated by the 2009 Summer Institute cohort.

## Upcoming Events

### Save the Date!! Reunion Workshop—Wednesday, October 7th, 2009

Come celebrate the start of 20 years for MWP. Guest presenter Mary Ann Smith, NWP Senior Scholar, will help us reflect on the best practices of teaching writing as she shares her experiences advocating for teachers in Washington, D.C. Also, other MWP educators will share their experiences of bringing the NWP writing philosophy into their classrooms and school districts.

### National Day on Writing—October 20, 2009

NCTE is sponsoring a variety of writing-related events to ring in this first-time celebration of the annual event. See page seven of this newsletter for more ideas and resources for celebrating this first annual event in your own classroom.

### MCTE Fall Workshop—Monday, October 26th, 2009

This year NCTE President Kylene Beers will be the featured speaker for the conference. For more details visit [www.mcte.org](http://www.mcte.org)



### New TCs Offer Guidance and Leadership

This year we have three new teachers who have offered their time and expertise to help advise and lead ongoing activities for our writing project. We thank them for their service. If you would like to be involved with the MWP Advisory Board or become a cohort representative, contact us at [mwp@umn.edu](mailto:mwp@umn.edu).



#### Theresa Behnke—MWP Advisory Board

Theresa is a Literacy Coordinator from the Center for Professional Development in the Saint Paul school district. Her areas of specialty focus on elementary reading and writing.



#### Debra Stortz—MWP Advisory Board

Debra works with elementary teachers as a professional development leader for Edina public schools. She is specifically interested in elementary writing instruction.



#### Brenda Butler—2009 Cohort Representative

Brenda teaches art to middle school students at Kee-waydin Campus, Lake Nokomis Community School. She is interested in issues of visual literacy and how these practices promote students' learning and traditional literacy skills.

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